Transient Children in the Education System

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Introduction

I met Brian this summer, when his family was staying at the Valley Mission Shelter in Staunton, VA. We'd play board games together a few times a week as part of a children's ministry project while his parents attended mandatory religious counseling. Though the shelter usually has a strict 90-day limit, they had allowed Brian's family to stay past their deadline because the economic crisis had made it nearly impossible for Brian's dad to find a job. Quiet and reserved, Brian wasn't the sort of kid that immediately grabbed your attention and affection. He suffered from asthma, was a bit puny for his fourteen years of age, and was already two grades behind in school because his family had moved around so much. He wasn't the best listener, and would prefer to hit and punch his brother than share the checker board—impulse control was not among his strong qualities. However, Brian loved to read the popular children's stories, *Goosebumps*, and I loved seeing how excited his face got when he was telling me about them. At the end of the summer, Brian gave me a thank-you card that, despite its poor grammar, was one of the sweetest gifts I've ever received.

On the other hand, Lexi was the type of toddler that lit up a room. With a big smile and bubbly, if demanding, personality, Lexi made everyone fall in love with her. However, I couldn't help but worry about how long that carefree attitude would last if she remained in a cramped shelter with dingy walls, cracked cement, and broken toys. Lexi couldn't sit still, follow directions, or recite her ABCs like I'd

come to expect from babysitting other four year olds. Plus, her bottle was usually filled with Coke—not exactly what I'd call brain food.

Brian and Lexi have a tough road ahead of them, and if the statistics are any indication, it'll be a miracle if they both graduate from high school, much less make it to any type of college. Unfortunately, they are not alone. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that children comprise approximately thirty-nine percent of the country's homeless population.[1] Homeless children, and transient children in general, are a growing problem in the United States that must be addressed. We can't condemn Brian and Lexi to a lifetime of low-achievement and helplessness; they deserve better.

The differences in the educational experiences and outcomes of poor children and their more financially stable peers have been widely studied. However, there are differences in achievement even among poor children, and those that are transient, like Brian and Lexi, face the most hardships.   The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that there are approximately 1.35 million children who experience homelessness in a given year.[2]   In addition, the Department of Health and Human Services estimates that over 423,000 are in foster

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[1] National Coalition for the Homeless. "Basic Fact Sheet". *National Coalition for the Homeless.* July, 2009. http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/.
[2] National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. "Children and Youth". *National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty.* http://www.nlchp.org/program.cfm?prog=2.

care during the year.[3]   With the lives of so many children hanging by a thread, it is imperative we do something to offer them a future.

II. Transient Children in the Education System

Although there are several categories of children that could be termed transient, this paper focuses on homeless children, mainly those living in shelters, and foster children. The populations are not entirely separate, as many children whose families experience homelessness are temporarily placed in foster care.[4] Children that are homeless or in foster care battle the same educational obstacles as regular poor children. They enter school with fewer cognitive skills than their peers because they are less likely to have had enriching preschool experiences. They may have poorer health, which makes it more difficult for them to concentrate on schoolwork and may cause them to miss more days of school. They have less support at home because their parents must work and deal with the stress of living in poverty. Their living conditions may be overcrowded or cause environmental stress. They may have inadequate nutrition. They do not have the same after-school or summer activities that promote development. All of these factors make it more difficult for impoverished children to succeed in, or even complete, their schooling.

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[3] Administration for Families and Children. "Foster Care FY 2002-2009". *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.* July, 2010. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/statistics/entryexit2009.htm.

[4] Cunningham, Mary, et al. "Residential Instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program ". *Metropolitan Housing and Community Center*. Washington, D.C. (2010): 3

The aggregate effects of such hardships lead to a substantial difference in school performance between poor children and their wealthier peers, which scholars have termed the achievement gap. The achievement gap appears in a variety of measures, including lower standardized tests scores, higher dropout rates, less challenging course selection, increased use of special education courses, and more instances of being disciplined in school.[5] In addition to worse statistics, the achievement gap also manifests in lower levels of emotional maturity and soft skills among poor students. To be blunt, poor children do not perform as well as financially secure children in virtually every aspect of school. Unfortunately, living in transitory housing not only exaggerates the above challenges, but also presents additional ones that make success in the education system even more difficult.

As a result, homeless children or those in foster care rarely exit the school system with a complete and adequate education, which means they are ill prepared to care for themselves later in life. In fact, a study by the Department of Health and Human Services revealed that of foster children who turned eighteen and exited the system in the last two and a half years, only seventeen percent were self-supporting.[6] In addition, HomeSafe, an advocacy agency for foster children, estimates that thirty-seven percent of foster children will become incarcerated in the first eighteen months after aging out of the system.[7] While there are some

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[5] Education Week. "Achievement Gap". *Education Week.* September 2004. http://www.edweek.org/ew/issues/achievement-gap/.
[6] Ayasse, Robed H. "Addressing the Needs of Foster Children: The Foster Youth Services Program." Social Work in Education 17.4 (1995).
[7] Home Safe. http://www.homesafeforkids.org/programs.html.

programs to aid transient children, they are not enough to close the achievement

gap and give these kids a fair chance at success.

Unfortunately, this problem is on the rise; in the 2007-2008 school year,

there was a seventeen percent increase in the number of homeless children enrolled

in schools over 2006-2007.[8] In addition, the spike in foreclosures as a result of the

recent economic downturn is likely to further increase the number of transient

children. As the crisis grows, it becomes even more deserving of our attention. If

children are the future, then society must do all it can to help them succeed,

especially for those disadvantaged to such an extreme level.

Justification for this statement is found in the work of philosopher Norman

Daniels, who advocates for the equality of opportunity principle. The principle holds

that all citizens are entitled to the same chance at living a healthy and successful life,

and if a citizen faces challenges that limit his or her opportunities, society owes

them the resources needed to gain equal footing. Though Daniel's work is meant to

resolve injustice in the health sector, this philosophy can be expanded to matters of

education, as the two are intricately linked. Healthier children learn better, and

more educated people are better prepared to maintain their health. Daniels states

that "Because meeting health care needs has an important effect on the distribution

of opportunity, the health-care institutions should be regulated by a fair equality of

opportunity principle," and this same logic holds for schooling.[9] Transient children

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[8] Cunningham, 2

[9] Daniels, Norman. *Just Health.* New York: Cambridge University Press (2008). 57

start with lower levels of both health and education, thus we have a duty to provide them with the resources they need to have a fair chance at success.

What is a transient child?

Under the No Child Left Behind Act, schools currently define a homeless individual as someone "who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," the definition established by the McKinney-Vento Act of 1989. This includes people living in motels, cars, shelters, campgrounds, or temporarily staying with friends or relatives. The average homeless family is comprised of a single mother in her late twenties, who has not completed high school, with two children.[10] Not only is a single-parent family stressful for all members, but many women become homeless as a result of domestic violence, and witnessing such abuse can further impede a child's development. Faced with the choice between an abusive relationship and homelessness, women are forced to take their children and flee. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence estimates that roughly half of all homeless women and children are victims of domestic violence.[11]

Children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population, but the problem is not spread evenly across the country. Families or single-mothers with children comprise the largest proportion of the homeless population in rural areas,

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[10] National Center on Family Homelessness. "America's Youngest Outcasts". *National Center on Family Homelessness.* http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/pdf/full_report/subgroups.pdf.
[11] National Coalition for the Homeless

whereas single men are the largest group in urban centers.[12] Additionally, seventy-

five percent of the country's homeless youth are concentrated in just eleven states,

mainly in the South, Southwest, and Mideast. They are Texas, California, Louisiana,

Georgia, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Arizona, Illinois, Missouri, and New

Mexico.[13]

The definition of a transient child also includes those living in foster care.

Foster care is defined as "full-time substitute care of children outside their own

home by people other than their biological or adoptive parents or their legal

guardian."[14] Foster children may not necessarily live with strangers; they are often

placed with other family members or friends. Foster care also includes institutional

group home settings, particularly for children in need of some sort of therapeutic

help, or in a foster home. According to a study published by the Department of

Health and Human Services Administration for Families, approximately 463,000

children were in foster care in September 2008. Of these, about one quarter were

placed with a relative, half were in non-relative foster homes, and about sixteen

percent were in institutions or group homes.[15] Many foster children are eventually

reunited with their families, some in just a few months. While all foster children

suffer some trauma and can have lower educational achievement than normal,

children that return to their families quickly or have a stable foster placement have

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[12] National Center on Family Homelessness

[13] Ibid.

[14] Children Welfare Information Gateway. "Foster Care Statistics". *U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.* http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.cfm.

[15] Ibn

better outcomes than children that change foster settings frequently. Unsurprisingly, research suggests that the more frequently a child changes care settings, the more likely they are to have emotional disturbance and lower school performance.[16]

Obviously, there is a wide variety in the quality of housing these children will experience. Some shelters have private rooms for each family, adequate space to play and do homework, and sanitary dining and hygiene facilities. However, the majority are cramped, overcrowded, and in buildings that may not be very nice or in safe areas of town. The same is true of foster care homes. Despite state-mandated requirements that foster homes be sanitary and safe, there is great discrepancy in the quality of homes in which children are placed.

What Types of Problems do Transient Children Experience?

Transient children experience the same problems as impoverished children, but on an aggravated scale. Every issue that regular poor children endure is exacerbated by the fact that transient children have a less stable lifestyle that inhibits their ability to grow, learn, and thrive. Additionally, they encounter many problems that are unique to their transient status, and all of these difficulties affect both the physical and mental well being.

Physical Health Concerns

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[16] Goerge, Robert M., et al. "Special-Education Experiences of Foster Children: An Empirical Study." *Child Welfare* 71.5 (1992): 420

Children living in homeless shelters and foster care get sick and stay sick more often than their peers. Often, homeless shelters or group foster homes are crowded, leaving residents with inadequate personal space, which allows for increased circulation of germs. Any time multiple people live together in a relatively confined space, sickness is bound to spread, so homeless children develop more colds. The conditions of the housing may contribute to health problems as well. Although there are state regulations regarding the sanitary conditions of homeless shelters and foster homes, they may be difficult to enforce, and there is a wide variety in conditions. Due to limited budgets, places where transient children are housed are often in old buildings, which may be dustier, or lack sufficient heating or cooling systems. A study in New York found that homeless children under the age of five were more likely to suffer from elevated lead levels even when compared to other poor children.[17] If a transient child is living in a car or campground, she may lack certain sanitary facilities such as a shower or toilet, which also contributes to elevated levels of disease.

Transient children also have less access to health services. They may not see a pediatrician for regular check-ups because they cannot afford to. This means that health issues may go unnoticed, or because transient children move so much, it is more difficult to establish and maintain a consistent treatment plan. Despite programs such as SCHIPS and Medicaid, which provide free healthcare for children, many families find the program registration too difficult to navigate or are unaware

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[17] Alperstein, Garth, et al. "Health Problems of Homeless Children in New York City". *American Journal of Public Health* 78.9 (1988) 1232

of how they can enroll. In addition, they often do not get necessary immunizations, which leaves them more vulnerable to disease. While potentially outdated, a 1988 study revealed that a sample of homeless children were three times more likely to have delayed immunizations than even other poor children.[18] In addition, they are less likely to see a dentist.[19]

Transient children also have less access to nutrition information and healthy foods. Homeless children are twice as likely to go hungry and two-thirds are worried about not having enough to eat.[20] When they do have full meals, they are dependent on whatever menu the homeless shelter or the foster institution sets, which tend to not be the healthiest choices. When I ate dinner with Brian, Lexi, and the other families, the shelter served a lot of processed meats with bread and butter. If we had a vegetable, it certainly wasn't fresh, and it was usually mushy and over-processed. It's hard to convince a four year old to eat a vegetable when it is an unappealing color and texture. Parents or foster caretakers are stressed; they may not have the patience to fight with children about what to eat. Lexi's coke-filled sippy cup speaks volumes about the quality of nutrition she receives.

Transient children's health may also suffer due to lack of exercise. Shelters rarely have the space for safe outdoor playgrounds, and the families don't have the time or money for their children to participate in after-school sports. For example, while other children might have spent their summer in sports training or at a day

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[18] Alperstein, 1233
[19] Kabler, Brenda and Elana Weinstein. "The State of Homeless Children in the United States". *Communiqué.* 38.4 (2009)
[20] Ibn

camp, Brian and Lexi were sitting around the cement-walled shelter. Because the

shelter is just off a very busy street and doesn't have much of a yard, they can't play

outside. I interviewed many shelter directors as part of my research this summer,

and every single one said they wished their shelter had a better playground for its

juvenile residents. The time to run around and play like a kid not only does

wonderful things for the children's spirit, but also strengthens their immune

systems. When transient children don't have these opportunities, their already-

compromised health suffers.

Transient children have higher levels of chronic disease than their regularly-

housed peers as well. One in seven homeless children suffers from at least a

moderate chronic condition.[21] In particular, they commonly suffer from

gastrointestinal issues, epilepsy, vision and hearing disorders, and asthma.[22] Brian

told me that his asthma had been severe enough to keep him out of school for days

at a time, and he is not an anomaly. While data specific to the population of

transient children is unavailable, children of low socioeconomic status are three

times more likely to repeatedly miss school for health-related reasons.[23] When a

family is already in a fragile state, or a foster child is already emotionally stressed

from being separated from their parents, being sick only further complicates their

lives. Consistent health issues make it much harder to focus and succeed in school.

In addition to missing school, health issues can make time in the classroom less

[21] Kabler

[22] Ready, Douglas. "Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early
Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure". *Sociology of
Education* 83.4 (2010): 271

[23] Ibn.

productive. How can you focus on schoolwork if you haven't had a decent meal or have a cold and feel crummy?

Emotional and Psychological Concerns

Children that become transient have experienced a trauma of some kind, and the residual effects of the experience can damage their emotional well-being. Children are placed in foster care when their own parents are no longer able to care for them. They have been neglected, abused, abandoned, or in some way endangered. Families that end up homeless have gone through stressful circumstances as well. Not only was the situation that landed them in foster care or a homeless shelter scary, but transient children have fewer resources and support systems to cope with the experience. They are less likely to have a strong bond with a parent because he or she is either out of the picture or more stressed and pressed for time as a result of dealing with the family's housing situation. They also have less access to professional mental healthcare experts and, because they move around a lot, are less likely to have formed supportive bonds with teachers, friends, or other people that could help the child cope. The lingering effects of the trauma can make it more difficult for the children to adapt to new surroundings, connect with people, and increase the likelihood children will become depressed. One in six homeless children has an emotional disturbance.[24] For example, children aging out

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[24] Kabler

of the foster system in Florida are 103% more likely to become alcoholics and 192% more likely to become addicted to drugs than average.[25]

There are conflicting studies as to whether being homeless increases the chances that a child will develop a mental disorder. Studies that group all mental illnesses together find limited differences between homeless and housed children. However, when the data is stratified into separate types of disease, significant differences emerge. While homeless children do not have a statistically significant chance of higher mood disorders, they are more than four times as likely to have disruptive behavior.[26] Such disorders can have particularly negative consequences in the classroom.

In addition, the lack of stability caused by not having an established home is extremely detrimental to a child's well being. Children crave security and routine, but when they are being shuffled from one foster family to another or moving from shelter to shelter, they do not get it. The constant change is a source of stress in their life and introduces an element of fear, because they do not know what to expect. As Swick states, transient "children are constantly frustrated by the social and emotional baggage that is part of being without a stable home environment."[27]

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[25] Home Safe
[26] Yu, Mansoo, et al. "A Comparison Study of Psychiatric and Behavior Disorders and Cognitive Ability Among Homeless and Housed Children". *Community Mental Health Journal.* 44:1 (2008): 4
[27] Swick, Kevin J. "Empowering Homeless and Transient Children/Families: An Ecological Framework for Early Childhood Teachers." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 26.3 (1999): 195

Therefore, the anxiety this creates leads transient children to be more likely to act out, misbehave in class, and have anger management issues.

Such traumatic experiences significantly increase the likelihood that transient children will develop some type of mental or emotional handicap. A study in Illinois found that though only two percent of the general school population was classified as "emotionally disturbed," thirteen percent of foster children were. Experts think even this number could be an underestimate, as many cases go unidentified when children are moved around too much to be diagnosed.[28] In addition, some estimates gauge the likelihood that foster children will become suicidal forty-three percent higher than average.[29] Studies have found the most common emotional issues from which foster children suffer are aggression and low self-esteem, and that older children are more likely to experience these problems than younger ones. Researchers are unclear as to whether this is because younger children are more adaptable, or that the problems of the older children are the result of longer exposure to the hardships of foster care.[30]

Manifestations in Educational Achievement

In particular, transient children fare worse in school than even other poor children because they are forced to change schools so often. A study in the Chicago Public School System found that homeless children changed schools 3.2 times per

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[28] Goerge, 429
[29] Home Safe
[30] Ayasse

year on average.[31] Such frequent transitions make it hard for transient children to form bonds with teachers, which means they often do not receive the same quality of instruction and there is less chance that a teacher will be able to identify a learning disorder. It can also result in gaps in skills and knowledge when the schools' curricula do not align. Such issues result in an even larger achievement gap between transient children and average students. Homeless children score sixteen percent lower on proficiency tests in reading and math than regular students, and only twenty-five percent of them graduate high school.[32] Foster children have below-average scores on standardized tests in math and reading and higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary action.[33] In addition, more than half have repeated at least one grade level, often for the same reasons that disrupt homeless children's learning environment.[34] Also, foster children that were identified as needing special education were less likely to receive the needed services than regular children identified as needing special education.[35]

Even when children stay in the same school, they have lower attendance rates than most children, which further reduce their scholastic achievement. In fact, children of low socioeconomic status are twenty-five percent more likely to miss three or more days of school per month.[36] If parents are concerned with finding a

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[31] Cunningham, 4

[32] Kabler

[33] Zetlin, Andrea, et. al. "Caregivers, School Liaisons, and Agency Advocates Speak Out about the Educational Needs of Children and Youths in Foster Care". *Social Work*. 55.3 (2010): 245

[34] Ibn

[35] Ayasse

[36] Ready

place for their family to spend the night, getting the child to school on time will probably not be a top priority. In addition, they may have transportation issues or irregular work schedules that prevent them from getting the child to school. For foster children, court dates, meetings with case managers, and general shuffling can make it difficult to keep to a regular school pattern. Plus, their lower levels of health also cause them to miss more school.

The frequent absences and changing of schools causes administrative difficulties for transient children as well. It is easy for their records to get lost when switching from school to school, which can make it hard for families to register their children in a new district. In particular, immunization records can be difficult to maintain since they do not have a set family pediatrician, but without them, children are not allowed to enroll in school. Schools have differing policies on the transfer of credits, so a child may not receive credit for all of the classes he or she has taken. In addition, even if a child's absences have not prevented him from completing a class's coursework, many schools have policies that automatically fail children who miss too many days of school. It can therefore be very difficult for transient children to get enough credits to receive their diploma, which helps explain their extremely low graduation rates. Only twenty-five percent of homeless youth graduate high school, and foster children are forty-four percent less likely to graduate than the average student.[37]

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[37] On the Move. "National Foster Care Statistics". *On the Move.* http://www.onthemovebayarea.org/node/561.

Living in a transient state can inhibit social relations as well, which further decreases cognitive skills. Because transient children miss so much school and move around so much, they have a hard time forming lasting friendships. They may also be embarrassed about their living situation or their lower levels of skills, which causes them to retreat. In addition, their emotional issues, such as aggressive behavior or depression, make it difficult for them to connect with their peers. Not having set friends to help them get through school makes learning much less enjoyable for transient children. It also limits their ability to learn soft skills, and not being able to interact well with others will further reduce their prospects in the long run.

Obviously, transient children have a dramatically lower quality of life and educational experience than most children. With higher levels of illness, poor living conditions and nutrition, frequent instances of emotional issues, high levels of grade repetition and special education use, and lower standardized test scores, it is easy to see how difficult it would be for a transient child to succeed in the education system. The capabilities approach, designed by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, illustrates just how disadvantaged transient children are. They do not function on the same level as normal children, and their freedom to live a lifestyle of their choosing is limited as a result. Because these children's capabilities have been limited by situations beyond their control, society should support programs and reforms that increase their capabilities.

However, we must accept that even the best-designed policies cannot possibly overcome all of the issues transient children face. Many of their difficulties, particularly those related to mental health, are rooted too deeply in family life for the school or government to address. Therefore, instead of looking to completely close the gap, we should look for ways to minimize it as much as possible.

What is being done to help?

The McKinney Vento Act of 1987, most recently renewed as part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, is responsible for the majority of the national policies regarding the services provided to homeless youth. Because the act's definition of homelessness includes children living with other family members because of economic hardship, some children in the foster system benefit from its programs as well. The Act requires that each state have a homeless services coordinator, and each school district must appoint a homeless liaison. The liaison is charged with identifying and reporting homeless youth in the school, coordinating services with local agencies and shelters, and promoting awareness of homeless issues within the district. Often, the person that serves as the homeless liaison also serves as the liaison for foster care children, so through this mechanism there is a possibility for coordination of services for the whole population of transient children. Unfortunately, these positions are not usually funded as full-time, which limits their effectiveness.[38]

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[38] Cunningham, 5

The act also helps remove barriers to enrollment for homeless youth in an effort to keep more of them in school. If a youth receives official designation as a "homeless student," then he or she can receive waivers for enrollment requirements, such as immunization records and proof of residence. Therefore, the issues associated with enrolling in school previously discussed can be overcome, but only if both the legal guardian and the school are informed about the McKinney-Vento Act. In addition, homeless students are entitled to remain in their original school until the end of the academic year in which they obtain permanent housing. This can limit gaps in curriculum and facilitate bonding with other students and teachers, which improves the student's well-being and makes it easier for schools to track progress.

In order to achieve the goal of keeping homeless students in their original school, the McKinney-Vento Act provides them with special transportation. Schools are required to alter bus routes, provide public transport vouchers, or reimburse gas to ensure children can get to school.[39] Not only does this limit the number of times transient children must switch schools, but it also improves attendance by ensuring transient children have a reliable way to get to school.

In addition, the McKinney-Vento Act stipulates that homeless children are eligible for other support services such as tutoring, free school supplies, early childhood education, referrals to medical and dental care, and before and after-school care. All of these services aim to minimize the constraints homeless youth

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[39] Ibn

face in the school system and help mitigate the negative effects of their instability so that they can narrow the achievement gap.

Such programs seem like a cost-effective way to mitigate some of the effects of transience. We have established that transient children have higher rates of grade repetition and special education use and an increased likelihood they will be incarcerated, which are all very costly. In addition, because of their low educational achievement, they are destined to become low-skilled workers or possibly unemployed, which increases the likelihood they will use government support programs, such as welfare, Medicaid, and unemployment benefits, and will be more likely to parent future homeless and foster children. All of these problems incur a large cost on society; why not spend a fraction of the aggregate cost to improve transient children's educational experience from the start? While the policies of the McKinney-Vento Act cannot overcome all of the problems associated with transience, they can make significant strides towards breaking the cycle of poverty.

Unfortunately, while schools are required to provide these services, they are only required to do as much as their budgets allow. Faced with limited resources, schools rarely fulfill all of the requirements of the act. Research on how many homeless students are currently underserved and how much it would cost to meet their needs is unavailable, but such estimates would be very useful for future reforms.

The Act is expected to receive around two billion dollars in the 2011 budget, but this money will be split between all subdivisions of the Act, not just the goals pertaining to homeless children.[40] It is unclear how much of this money will go directly to school programs, but it is safe to say it will not be enough to ensure the educational success of all homeless youth. Only six percent of school districts receive funds from the McKinney Vento Act fund, which serve only sixty-one percent of the homeless youth population.[41] Districts that enrolled the remaining homeless youth population are required to fund services for them from other sources. However, in a time of intense school budget cuts, transient youths' needs are not being fully met. Even schools that do receive McKinney funds struggle, and nearly every school devotes an insufficient amount of funds to overcome the achievement gap transient students face. There is currently no estimate of the total amount of money spent by all school districts on services for homeless children. Such data would be very useful, as it would give experts a better estimate of how large a grant would be needed to adequately address the problem.

In addition, there are other barriers that prevent the McKinney-Vento Act from fully integrating homeless students into the educational system. Many parents may be unaware of the act, and thus do not take advantage of its services, or they may not wish to identify themselves as homeless for fear of being stigmatized. Also, because of the limited funding, many programs have waitlists and cannot serve the

[40] National Alliance to End Homelessness. "FY 2011 Appropriations". *National Alliance to End Homelessness.* August 2010. http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/2596.
[41] Cunningham, 6

existing population, so there is a disincentive among liaisons to identify even more students they cannot help.[42]

While the McKinney-Vento Act has been in existence for over twenty years, it has seen limited results. Lack of funding has prohibited many of its goals from being implemented. In addition, knowledge of the provisions of the act is not widespread, particularly among the families in question. If they do not know what their rights are, how can they know to ask for them? When parents and educators are unaware of the services for which they are eligible, they limit their children's educational success. Brian had been diagnosed with a learning disorder, and given that he has repeated two grades, we can assume it is relatively severe. Yet his parents have not demanded the school develop and implement an individualized education plan (IEP) for him, a service they are legally required to do. Instead of getting the personalized attention he needed in school, Brian was stuck in a regular classroom, falling further behind.

Data on the results of the act are scare, and there are few comprehensive evaluations. However, one of the few studies to come out of the program suggests that the act may have been effective in decreasing the number of days homeless children were absent from school. The 2001 study found no statistically significant differences in attendance between homeless and housed children.[43] More research will be needed to confirm these results and evaluate other components of the bill.

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[42] Ibn
[43] Cunningham, 4

Luckily, under reauthorization as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, schools were required to begin collecting data on how they serve homeless children under McKinney-Vento in 2004. Hopefully studies analyzing these figures will soon emerge. Greater understanding of how policy has translated into real-world practice is greatly needed.

What else needs to be done?

Obviously, the best way to reduce the negative effects of transience would be to reduce transience in the first place. If we could strengthen families so that fewer children ended up homeless or in foster care, the difficulties associated with these conditions would diminish. However, recognizing how difficult and intrusive such policies could be, the school is the next-best solution. Children spend a significant portion of their waking hours in school; it can be the source of stability they need. Repetition in the daily school routine builds a sense of consistency, and getting transient children immersed in the school can give them a sense of community and identity. In addition, it provides an ideal setting to form encouraging relationships with teachers and other students, if only we can get transient children to stay in one school.

The McKinney-Vento Act represents a list of goals that would go a long way towards closing the achievement gap between transient students and the rest of society. However, to be more effective, it must be funded at a reasonable level. A larger budget is needed specifically for the portions of the Act that relate to children

and education. Giving schools enough money to provide transportation, tutoring, and liaisons could help transient children stay in school.

However, having adequate funds to support such programs will not be enough if people do not know that the programs exist. Greater education is needed so that all shelter directors, foster parents, caseworkers, and homeless families are aware of their rights. When a family enters a homeless shelter, its caseworker could give the family a list of all the services its children are eligible for and help them file the appropriate paperwork with the school. If families are reached at the beginning of their time of crisis, the negative effects of becoming homeless can be minimized. Similarly, if all foster parents and caseworkers were told of everything their wards were entitled to as soon as the child entered the system, foster children could begin receiving services before they fall too far behind.

Such advocacy should come from school liaisons and shelter workers, so that the process is streamlined and the agencies a family has to deal with are limited. However, given how overworked most of these workers are, more staff workers would have to be hired. Non-profits could also fill this gap by working with school systems and shelters to educate and advocate for transient children and educate them on their rights.

For example, a program in California called "Foster Youth Services" has demonstrated great success in improving the well-being of its participants. Recognizing that "foster children are frequently dysfunctional human beings at great penal and welfare costs" to the state, and that "it is unlikely that the school

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staff, substitute care giver or placement worker will have the time, the expertise, or the inclination to make sure that the educational needs and rights of each foster child are properly addressed," FYS employs counselors to address the needs of foster children.[44] Counselors specifically focus on keeping track of their clients' credits and transcripts, immunization records, and getting them tested to ensure proper grade placement. In addition they have programs that focus on school advocacy, tutoring, counseling, and employment readiness. FYS has a track record of success. Seventy percent of high school seniors in foster care receiving FYS graduated from high school, compared to the average graduation rate among foster care seniors of only fifty percent.[45]

Increasing school budgets for counselors would be of great benefit to transient youth as well. Most of the psychological problems from which transient children suffer result from the traumatizing experiences that made them transient. Access to a certified counselor could help the kids work through these issues and learn necessary coping strategies. The counselor could identify and address behavioral issues and serve as another set of eyes looking out for learning disorders or health problems.

A significant facet of the counselor's role should be focused on parental involvement as well. Despite assumptions about parenting skills, my interactions in the shelters suggest that transient parents still want the best for their children, but are constrained in their knowledge and ability. School counselors could reach out to

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parents and offer them advice on parenting, appropriate discipline, and helping with homework. In addition, the counselor could encourage them to get more involved in the school, which would not only demonstrate to children the importance of an education, but could benefit the parents as well. The school could provide a sense of community and add another layer of support for them during their time of need. Any positive effects from improvements in schooling and McKinney-Vento Act programs would be amplified by improved home life.

There is also a greater need for tutoring and mentoring programs. Mentors help address many of the issues transient children face. They can provide the homework assistance needed to improve children's school performance and instill the value of education. By offering praise and encouragement, they can build up self-esteem and help children learn soft-skills and responsibility. They can also become a much-needed source of stability in a transient child's life. Mentors become another set of eyes looking out for the child and a positive role model, a source of both comfort and inspiration. Nearly every director I interviewed this summer cited their tutoring program as the one with the largest impact on their juvenile residents. An expanded network of either students or adults that served as mentors could make a big difference in the lives of our nation's most vulnerable youth.

In order for more people to take action helping transient youth, greater attention must be focused on their plight. When most people think of a homeless person, images of grungy, drunk men living under bridges spring to mind. Yet

today's homeless population includes millions of children. A national campaign to educate citizens on the true face of homelessness and what they can do to help could inspire more people to fight this injustice.

In addition, we clearly need more information in this area. With better data on how transient children differ from other poor children, how to enroll more in SCHIPS, how effective the McKinney-Vento Act has been, and other issues, we could craft better policies. However, it is important to recognize the limits of what we can reasonably collect given the nature of the population in question. By the very fact that the children are transient, they are difficult to track, measure and count. At some point, the resources spent collecting data on the population may be better spent in programs trying to close their achievement gap. While we should strive to better understand the population, we must also not let it distract us from the mission of actually helping them.

Concluding Remarks

Transient children confront many disadvantages, and the reverberating effects influence all areas of their life. With higher levels of disease, more emotional disturbances, unstable and often inadequate living conditions, and poor educational achievement, it is quite obvious that transient children face a difficult and often cruel life. It should be readily apparent that through no fault of their own, these children lack equality of opportunity. Circumstances beyond their control have forced them into a situation where their chances of achieving an acceptable

standard of living are severely limited. Transient children deserve a chance at success, and it is to both their benefit and ours that we provide them with the tools necessary to do so.

No amount of mentoring or specialized education plans or nutrition classes can overcome all of the obstacles these children face; sadly, many of the issues may be deeper than the school policies can address. Yet this should not dampen our desire to help. While we may not be able to completely reverse the damage that has been done, we can make vast improvements in their lives by improving their educational experiences. The policies recommended can mitigate some of the effects of transience and put the children on the path to a better life. Even if we cannot close the entire gap, we can narrow it. Brian, Lexi, and the millions of other transient children in this country deserve that.

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